

County pneumonia cases surged during Army tests

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Calhoun County was the only Northeast Alabama county to experience a steep increase in the number of reported pneumonia cases from 1951 to 1952, the year the Army conducted a simulated warfare attack on Ft. McClellan, according to Alabama Health Department figures.

In 1952, Calhoun County reported 12 per cent of the state's pneumonia cases, but had only three per cent of the state's population.

The 1952 Army test involved the introduction of two bacteria into the area around Ft. McClellan and was part of a program of simulated germ warfare attacks conducted at eight military bases and U.S. cities between 1950 and 1960.

One of the bacteria used in the Ft. McClellan test, *Serratia Marcescens*, can cause pneumonia, according to health officials.

COMPARED TO the increase in Calhoun County's reported pneumonia cases from 1951 to 1952, from 98 to 333, changes in the number of cases reported by other area county's were relatively small, according to the state's data.

Talladega County's reported cases went from seven in 1951 to eight in 1952. In Clay County, reported instances increased from none in 1951 to one the following year. Cleburne County's reported cases fell from one in 1951 to none in 1952.

In Madison and Etowah counties, which had populations in 1952 about the same as Calhoun, the reported instances of pneumonia decreased from 1951 to 1952, according to state figures.

Reported pneumonia cases in Madison County fell from four in 1951 to two in 1952. In Etowah County reported cases fell from 27 in 1951 to 11 in 1952.

REPORTED DEATHS from pneumonia in Calhoun County remained the same from 1951 to 1952, according to the state's figures. In both years 25 deaths from pneumonia were reported to the health department from Calhoun County.

The number of reported deaths from pneumonia in Madison County fell from 38 in 1951 to 22 in 1952. In Etowah County reported pneumonia deaths increased from 25 in 1951

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to 28 in 1952, according to health department figures.

Dr. Fredrick Wolf, director of the department of preventable disease with the State Health Department, said in some cases the number of reported deaths in a county outnumber the reported instances because "health reporting in Alabama stinks."

DR. WOLF said authorities could not be certain if the increases in reported pneumonia cases in Calhoun County in 1952 resulted from the biological warfare tests or from some other causes.

Dr. Wolf said early in 1952 Alabama was still in the middle of a mild influenza epidemic which swept across the nation in 1951 and 1952.

According to Dr. Wolf, the increased number of pneumonia cases in 1952 may have been the result of the epidemic.

Persons with influenza are more susceptible to catching pneumonia, he said.

Persons with influenza are also more susceptible to contracting pneumonia from *Serratia Marcescens*, the bacterium used in the Army test, he said.

Bruce Hodges, supervisor of microbiology at the Northeast Alabama Regional Medical Center, agrees.

"IF A PERSON with influenza contacted this organism (*Serratia*), it could be very dangerous," he said. "If a person does get pneumonia from the bacterium it would be all the more dangerous because it (the bacterium) is so resistant to antibiotics."

To get pneumonia from the bacterium, people would usually have to be in a weakened condition, Hodges said. Having influenza would place people in such a condition.

Hodges said infants are more susceptible to the disease than are older people. The health department does not record the ages of persons who contract or die from a particular disease.

While no definite connection between the Army's tests and the increase in the number of cases of pneumonia in Calhoun County has been established, a spokesman for the U.S. Justice Department in Birmingham said there may be "possible grounds" for a class action suit against the Army on behalf of persons in Calhoun County who contracted pneumonia in 1952.

"There are obstacles to a suit of this kind. I couldn't tell you what they are or whether the statute of limitations has run out without doing some research," the spokesman, who asked not to be identified, said. "But it all sounds very interesting."

SOURCES in Washington told The Star the bacteria used in the tests were "closely related" to deadly bacteria which the Soviet Union had stockpiled in its chemical warfare arsenal at the time.

The Army said it discontinued offensive tests with biological warfare weapons in 1969 following a ban on offensive biological weapons and stockpiling. Tests since 1969 have been of a "defensive nature," an Army spokesman said.

The areas other than Ft. McClellan used by the Army for testing were Key West and Panama City, Fla.; New York City and San Francisco; military installations at Point Mugu and Port Hueneme, Calif., in the Los Angeles area, and a Navy facility in Mechanicsburg, Pa. The Army also admitted testing bacteria at the Pentagon but would discuss no details.

The Army test in San Francisco in 1950 may have caused the death of a hospital patient.